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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses underlying beliefs about teaching that are related to the assessment of prospective teachers and elucidates some basic beliefs that are guiding the development of new types of assessments for new teachers. These new assessments are called "The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers(TM)." Differences among learners are of critical importance in the teaching-learning process. In addition to the different requirements of different students, there are different requirements for teaching different subjects. Teachers need to develop an instructional repertoire and skill in selecting appropriate procedures from this repertoire. In constructing the Praxis Assessments, teaching tasks have been grouped into four broad domains for discussion, analysis, and assessment: (1) organizing content knowledge for student learning; (2) creating an environment for student learning; (3) teaching for student learning; and (4) teacher professionalism. Each task domain must be examined from thought and action perspectives. This view of teaching and learning has implications for any assessment construction and implementation, but especially for the performance-based assessments that will be a component of The Praxis Series. An appendix lists 12 learner-centered psychological principles. Two figures illustrate the domains. (SLD)

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THE PRAXIS SERIES
Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™

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GUIDING CONCEPTIONS AND ASSESSMENT PRINCIPLES for The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™

Carol Anne Dwyer and Ana Maria Villegas

Revised
January 1993

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Educational Testing Service

GUIDING CONCEPTIONS AND ASSESSMENT PRINCIPLES
for
The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™

Carol Anne Dwyer and Ana Maria Villegas
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Revised
January 1993

Introduction

This paper discusses underlying beliefs about teaching that are related to the assessment of prospective teachers. It is an updating of our earlier papers, "Assessing the Beginning Teacher: Guiding Conceptions" and "Guiding Conceptions and Assessment Principles for The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™". This paper elucidates some basic beliefs that guide our work in developing new types of assessments for new teachers. These new assessments are called The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™.

In the pages that follow, we will highlight what we know about teaching, what we value about teaching, and what we believe can and should be assessed about prospective teachers. We begin by recognizing a series of contradictions and limitations:

What we "know" about teaching today is inherently subject to change as teachers themselves change their practice and as research on teaching accumulates.

Assessments that we develop for the early 1990s will need continual refinement as we learn more about effective teaching and how to gather data about it.

What we value about teaching will always exceed both what we know about teaching and what we can reasonably and fairly assess under most practical circumstances.

What we can assess about prospective teachers is not necessarily the same as what we wish to assess. We need to be concerned with both the intended and the unintended consequences of our actions.

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Conception of Teaching and Learning

Although it is often not explicitly stated, a conception of teaching underlies any teacher assessment. In this portion of the paper we describe the view of teaching that underlies the development of The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™.

Classroom life is complex and ever-changing. The situations that teachers face vary widely, largely because they engage in intensive interaction with relatively large numbers of students who have different individual characteristics and cultural backgrounds, and who are at different developmental levels.

As individuals, learners differ with regard to abilities, interests, intellectual curiosity, motivation for learning, approaches to learning, and rate of learning. Culturally, students differ in language backgrounds, value orientations, beliefs, and interaction styles. Learners can also be at different levels of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. The American Psychological Association's Learner-centered psychological principles: Guidelines for school redesign and reform provides an excellent overview of the view of learning that complements the view of teaching that guides The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™. (These principles are summarized in Appendix A.)

Differences among learners are of critical importance in the teaching-learning process. A single set of teaching procedures cannot possibly meet the needs of all, or indeed most, students. This is because teaching does not involve pouring information into empty vessels. Rather, teaching entails engaging students as active learners to induce changes in their preexisting knowledge. To do this, teachers must build on students' experiences, abilities, interests, motivation, and skills. This demands that teachers continually adjust their strategies to meet their pupils' needs. Increasingly, teachers are consulting with one another about such decisions. This collaborative approach encourages teachers to build on their professional experiences for the purpose of developing methods and techniques that are appropriate to specific classroom situations.

The fact that there are different requirements for teaching different subjects also contributes to the complexity of classroom life. Many teachers provide instruction in different subjects and for different purposes. As these teachers shift from one subject area to another or change educational objectives, they often modify instructional practices to make the new content comprehensible and interesting to the students. For example, strategies that are effective when teaching mathematics to a group of first graders may prove ineffective when teaching reading comprehension to the same students. The nature of the subject matter itself significantly shapes our view of what constitutes good teaching practice in that discipline. For example, the band director's teaching methods may be very different from those of the biology teacher.

Because classroom life is complex and varies with regard to students and subject matter, among other things, teachers need to develop an instructional repertoire and skill in selecting from this repertoire procedures that are appropriate for the particular situation. That is, effective teachers adapt instruction to the needs of the students and the situation rather than rigidly follow fixed scripts. The complexity of teaching thus requires making thoughtful decisions, then putting them into action.

Teaching can be characterized in various ways for various purposes. In The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™, we have found it helpful to group teaching tasks into four broad areas or domains for discussion, analysis, and assessment:

1. organizing content knowledge for student learning
2. creating an environment for student learning
3. teaching for student learning
4. teacher professionalism

In keeping with our view of teaching and learning, these domains are conceived of as interrelated aspects or facets of a complex set of actions and cognitions called "teaching," not as independent constructs or "pieces" of teaching. In our discussions and analyses, as in our practical work in assessment, we resist fragmentation of teaching and attempt in all aspects of research, development, and implementation to respect its complexity.

Also in keeping with our guiding conception of teaching, each task domain is examined from two perspectives simultaneously--thought and action. The theoretical and empirical literature on effective instruction is rich with information about recommended teaching behaviors or actions in each of these four areas. These behaviors and actions, however, must be adapted by teachers to fit their specific students and teaching situations. This adaptation requires reflection, judgment, and decision making. Of special concern to us is how the teacher adapts instruction to the context variables such as the subject matter being taught and students' individual differences, cultural backgrounds, and developmental levels. In our view, these are the four classroom context variables that have the greatest impact on learning. Thus, our model of the teaching process involves four broad teaching task areas that interact with student variables, all within the context of a particular subject matter. The teaching and learning interactions flow from the teacher to the student, and from the student to the teacher. This can be represented simply by the model shown in Figure 1 on the following page.

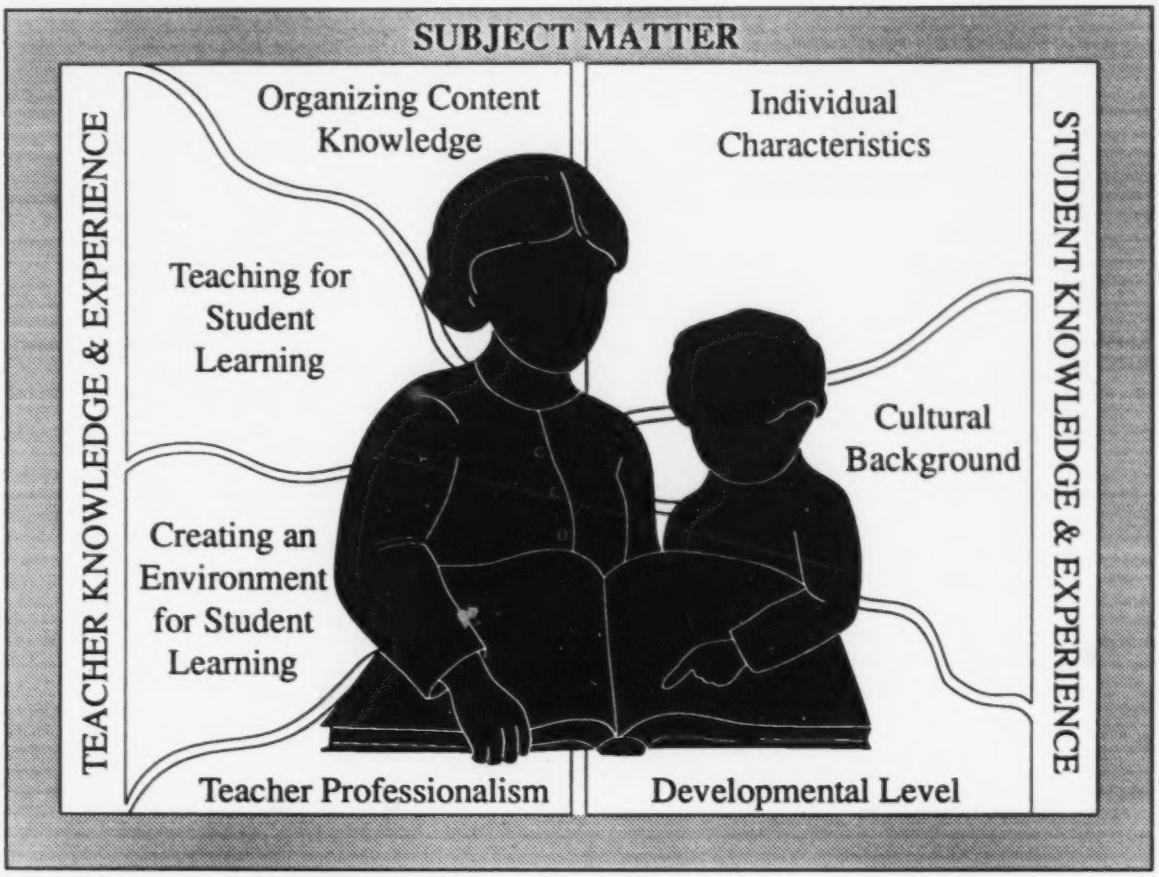

Figure 1. Model of teaching and learning in subject-matter context.

Figure 2 shows how the model of teaching and learning portrayed in Figure 1 is integrated into the Praxis III: Classroom Performance Assessments. The interactive process of teaching and learning forms the basis for data gathering via conferences, observation, interviews, and written sources of information. These data are generated by interactions between the prospective teacher and the assessor, and form the basis for the assessor's reflection on and analysis of the data and, ultimately, the assessor's reaching judgments about the candidate's teaching competence. For purposes of teacher assessment and feedback, the assessor also provides explanations and summary documentation for the judgments he or she has made.

Teacher and Students

Teaching and Learning Take Place

SUBJECT MATTER

Teacher and Assessor

Data Gathering

• Conferences • Interviews • Observation
• Documentation and Attestation

Assessor

Reflection and Analysis

Assessor

Judgment, Explanation, and Summary Documentation

Figure 2. Model of teaching and learning integrated into The Praxis Series: Classroom Performance Assessment process.

In brief, the demands of teaching are complex because they are part of a complex classroom environment that requires teachers to make important and often difficult decisions. Our conception of teaching takes into account this element of reflection, judgment, and decision making as well as observable behaviors.

In the section that follows, we explain the framework used in Praxis III: Classroom Performance Assessments to assess teacher performance.

The Framework

As mentioned above, we have organized the work of teachers into four task domains that provide the structure for our teaching framework. Within each domain, we have identified a set of criteria by which teaching can be judged across a wide range of situations. A unique feature of this framework is the infusion of a multicultural perspective throughout the criteria. The framework represents our best efforts to characterize teaching to meet three goals: accurately reflecting the complexity of classroom life and the high level of judgment and professional knowledge that teaching requires; rendering these complexities comprehensible to teachers and other educators, as well as to the general public; and providing a suitable structure for a fair and technically sound performance assessment system.

Domain A: Organizing Content Knowledge for Student Learning

Knowledge of the content to be taught underlies all aspects of good instruction. Domain A focuses on how teachers use their understanding of students and subject matter to decide on learning goals; to design or select appropriate teaching methods, learning activities, and instructional materials; to sequence instruction in ways that will help students to meet short- and long-term curricular goals; and to design or select informative evaluation strategies. All of these processes, beginning with the learning goals, must be aligned with each other, and because of the diverse needs represented in any class, each of the processes mentioned must be carried out in ways that take into account the variety of knowledge and experiences that students bring to class. Therefore, knowledge of relevant information about the students themselves is an integral part of this domain.

Domain A is concerned with how the teacher thinks about the content to be taught. This thinking is evident in how the teacher organizes instruction for the benefit of her or his students.

A1: Becoming familiar with relevant aspects of students' background knowledge and experiences

A2: Articulating clear learning goals for the lesson that are appropriate for the students

A3: Demonstrating an understanding of the connections between the content that was learned previously, the current content, and the content that remains to be learned in the future

A4: Creating or selecting teaching methods, learning activities, and instructional materials or other resources that are appropriate for the students and that are aligned with the goals of the lesson

A5: Creating or selecting evaluation strategies that are appropriate for the students and that are aligned with the goals of the lesson

Domain B: Creating an Environment for Student Learning

Domain B relates to the social and emotional components of learning as prerequisites to academic achievement. Thus, most of the criteria in this domain focus on the human interactions in the classroom, on the connections between teachers and students, and among students. Domain B addresses issues of fairness and rapport, of helping students to believe that they can learn and can meet challenges, and of establishing and maintaining constructive standards for behavior in the classroom. It also includes the learning "environment" in the most literal sense--the physical setting in which teaching and learning take place.

A learning environment that provides both emotional and physical safety for students is one in which a broad range of teaching and learning experiences can occur. Teachers must be able to use their knowledge of their students in order to interpret their students' behavior accurately and respond in ways that are appropriate and supportive. When they do so, their interactions with students consistently foster the students' sense of self-esteem. In addition, teachers' efforts to establish a sense of the classroom as a community with clear standards should never be arbitrary; all behavioral standards and teacher-student interactions should be grounded in a sense of respect for students as individuals.

B1: Creating a climate that promotes fairness

B2: Establishing and maintaining rapport with students

B3: Communicating challenging learning expectations to each student

B4: Establishing and maintaining consistent standards of classroom behavior

B5: Making the physical environment as safe and conducive to learning as possible

Domain C: Teaching for Student Learning

This domain focuses on the act of teaching and its overall goal: helping students to connect with the content. As used here, "content" refers to the subject matter of a discipline and may include knowledge, skills, perceptions and values in any domain: cognitive, social, artistic, and physical. Teachers direct students in the process of establishing individual connections with the content, thereby devising a good "fit" for the content within the framework of the students' knowledge, interests, abilities, cultural backgrounds and personal backgrounds. At the same time, teachers should help students to move beyond the limits of their current knowledge or understanding. Teachers monitor learning, making certain that students assimilate information accurately and that they understand and can apply what they have learned. Teachers must also be sure that

students understand what is expected of them procedurally during the lesson and that class time is used to good purpose.

C1: Making learning goals and instructional procedures clear to students

C2: Making content comprehensible to students

C3: Encouraging students to extend their thinking

C4: Monitoring students' understanding of content through a variety of means, providing feedback to students to assist learning, and adjusting learning activities as the situation demands

C5: Using instructional time effectively

Domain D: Teacher Professionalism

Teachers must be able to evaluate their own instructional effectiveness in order to plan specific lessons for particular classes and to improve their teaching over time. They should be able to discuss the degree to which different aspects of a lesson were successful in terms of instructional approaches, student responses, and learning outcomes. Teachers should be able to explain how they will proceed to work toward learning for all students. The professional responsibilities of all teachers, including beginning teachers, also include sharing appropriate information with other professionals and with families in ways that support the learning of diverse student populations.

D1: Reflecting on the extent to which the learning goals were met

D2: Demonstrating a sense of efficacy

D3: Building professional relationships with colleagues to share teaching insights and to coordinate learning activities for students

D4: Communicating with parents or guardians about student learning

Our framework is based on information from many sources. Our research has drawn heavily on the knowledge and experience of thousands of practicing teachers across the country, teacher educators, researchers, and officials of state education agencies. Both the framework itself and the criteria that will be used to assess new and prospective teachers are the result of this research and a careful and complex process of consultation with advisory panels, other groups of teachers, and staff at Educational Testing Service. The framework and criteria have undergone extensive field testing, but further refinements will no doubt follow as we continue to gain practical experience. At this point, however, the framework represents our best efforts to characterize teaching in ways that meet the three objectives of representing teaching's complexity, communicating effectively with a broad audience, and providing the basis for the performance assessments of The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™.

Implications for Performance Assessments

The view of teaching described above carries with it implications for how all of The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™ assessments are designed and implemented, but this is particularly true of the performance assessment components. Following are some of the basic principles that flow from our guiding conception of teaching and inform this part of our work.

Teacher assessments should contribute to the equitable treatment of all teachers and their students. A concern for fairness should permeate the entire teaching environment, including teacher assessments. Teachers' behavior and dispositions should reflect respect for the individual students in their care. Teachers should also possess practical and theoretical knowledge of major groups. Whatever the backgrounds and characteristics of the students they actually teach, teachers should strive to exemplify equitable and respectful behavior and to encourage their students' understanding of the multicultural nature of our society. Beginning teacher assessments should incorporate information about this knowledge and skill in the judgments made about teachers. Similarly, assessments should be equitable for all beginning teachers, and should not attempt to dictate specific professional decisions such as a particular style of teaching or of interacting with students.

Assessments must focus on both teachers' actions and their professional decision making. Assessments should focus on teacher actions and judgments as they are demonstrated and explained within the natural classroom setting. This requires recognition of the complex and dynamic context of the classroom, giving attention to the subject matter being taught and to the individual, developmental, and cultural differences of students in the class. Understanding the decision-making process implies that teachers must have the opportunity to explain the basis for their actions and decisions as part of the assessments, and to demonstrate that they possess a solid base of knowledge of the content they teach and the principles of learning and teaching that comprise the theoretical knowledge base for teaching. To assess knowledge and skills of such diversity, a variety of assessment methods should be used, some of which require a high degree of judgment by trained assessors; simple checklists of isolated skills are inadequate for assessing teaching skill and unlikely to have a positive effect on teaching and learning. The Praxis III: Classroom Performance Assessments combine interviews with the teacher, direct classroom observation, and review of documents completed by the teacher to collect data about 19 key aspects of teaching. Each of these aspects must then be judged by trained assessors in the context of the subject matter and students being taught.

Specific and professionally meaningful standards of teaching knowledge and practice can be developed and assessed. The belief that the classroom context is highly variable presents a technical challenge to any assessment effort. Because the classroom context is so complex, it is unlikely that good teaching will result simply from the routine application of a specified set of procedures. We believe, however, that through careful research and consultation with teachers and other educators, appropriate standards of professional knowledge and practice can be developed and assessed. We have assembled a knowledge base for the assessment of beginning teachers, and we have devised a psychometrically sound way to assess teachers' knowledge, actions, and decisions in the classroom context.

Assessment must be geared to the prospective teacher's level of professional development. Teaching competence develops slowly, over a long period of time. When

they first enter the classroom, prospective teachers do not possess all of the knowledge and skills they will need to become highly competent teachers. The process of acquiring the knowledge and skill of an expert teacher continues for many years--some would even say throughout the teacher's entire career. In a world where knowledge will continue to expand at an ever-increasing rate, assessments of prospective teachers, although necessarily limited to the experience requirements of these early stages of teaching, should provide a solid and consistent basis for continuing professional development. Early assessments for beginning teachers should be compatible with later assessments, such as those being planned by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

The assessment should be a learning experience for the beginning teacher. A basic goal of assessments of beginning teachers is to differentiate the competent from the incompetent prospective teacher. An equally important goal of our assessments, however, is to encourage good practice in teaching. The ability to teach can be acquired; thus, wherever possible, prospective teachers should be given the tools and opportunity, in the assessment itself, to improve the knowledge and skills that are being evaluated.

Teacher assessments should contribute to the professionalization of teaching. As a small but critical part of the educational process, teacher assessments should contribute to the improvement of the educational system as a whole. The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™ should reflect the restructuring of teaching as a profession. In keeping with a professional view of teaching, the assessments focus on both a repertoire of specialized strategies on the part of teachers and the exercise of judgment about when those strategies should be applied. This attention to judgment and decision making is based on our belief that effective teaching behaviors cannot be prescribed with certainty because the classroom context is too dynamic and complex for fixed instructional formulas.

Conclusion

Our conception of teaching implies that there is no single "right way" to teach. Similarly, there is no single right way to assess teachers. As we develop our assessments, we will be amassing a great deal of information, research, and advice, and we will be providing a number of alternatives to address differing local needs and varying teaching styles.

The essence of teaching is human interaction. It is not enough to know that a prospective teacher has acquired the requisite knowledge and skills. The full assessment of a teacher requires careful observation of actual teaching behavior, with actual students, and thoughtful, professional interactions between the assessor and the prospective teacher. In this natural context the teacher can demonstrate his or her capacity to apply teaching knowledge and skills in a manner that promotes student learning.

The development and implementation of The Praxis Series: Professional Assessments for Beginning Teachers™ is an endeavor that requires not only the sustained input of a highly diverse group of teachers and other educators, but also their desire to work together in an attempt to effect important changes that will benefit both teachers and the students whose lives they so profoundly influence.

Appendix A

Learner-Centered Psychological Principles[1]

Metacognitive and Cognitive Factors

Principle 1: The nature of the learning process. Learning is a natural process of pursuing personally meaningful goals that is active, volitional, and internally mediated; it is a process of discovering and constructing meaning from information and experience filtered through each individual's unique perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

Principle 2: Goals of the learning process. The learner seeks to create meaningful and coherent representations of knowledge regardless of the quantity and quality of data available.

Principle 3: The construction of knowledge. The learner organizes information in ways that associate and link new information with existing and future-oriented knowledge in uniquely meaningful ways.

Principle 4: Higher-order thinking. Higher-order strategies for "thinking about thinking" -- for overseeing and monitoring mental operations--facilitate creative and critical thinking and the development of expertise.

Principle 5: Motivational influences on learning. The depth and breadth of information processed, and what and how much is learned and remembered, is influenced by (a) self-awareness and beliefs about personal control, competence, and ability; (b) clarity and saliency of personal values, interests, and goals; (c) personal expectations for success or failure; (d) affect, emotion, and general states of mind; and (e) the resulting motivation to learn.

Principle 6: Intrinsic motivation to learn. Individuals are naturally curious and enjoy learning in the absence of intense negative cognitions and emotions (e.g., insecurity, worrying about failure, being self-conscious or shy, fearing corporal punishment or verbal ridicule or stigmatizing labels).

Principle 7: Characteristics of motivation -- enhancing learning tasks. Curiosity, creativity, and higher-order thinking processes are stimulated by relevant, authentic learning tasks of optimal difficulty, challenge, and novelty for each student.

Principle 8: Development constraints and opportunities. Individuals proceed through identifiable progressions of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development that are a function of unique genetic and environmental factors.

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[1]Excerpted from American Psychological Association. (August, 1992). Learner-centered psychological principles: Guidelines for school redesign and reform. Washington, DC: Author.

Principle 9: Social and cultural diversity. Learning is facilitated by social interactions and communication with others in a variety of flexible, diverse (cross-age, culture, family background, etc.), and adaptive instructional settings.

Principle 10: Social acceptance, self-esteem, and learning. Learning and self-esteem are heightened when individuals are in respectful and caring relationships with others who see their potential, genuinely appreciate their unique talents, and accept them as individuals.

Principle 11: Individual differences in learning. Although basic principles of learning, motivation, and effective instruction apply to all learners (regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, presence or absence of physical handicap[s], religion, or socioeconomic status), learners differ in their preferences for learning mode and strategies and in their unique capabilities in particular areas. These differences are a function of both environment (what is learned and communicated in different cultures or other social groups) and heredity (what occurs naturally as a function of genes and resulting differential capacities).

Principle 12: Cognitive "filters." Personal thoughts, beliefs, and understandings resulting from prior learning and unique interpretations become each individual's basis for constructing reality and interpreting life experiences.